

## 2013 Letters About Literature Level 3 Honorable Mention

Leah Mell's letter to Colum McCann, author of *Let The Great World Spin*

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January 8, 2013

Dear Colum McCann,

When *Let the Great World Spin* first caught my eye in a local bookstore, I did not know what I would discover hidden within its pages. It was simply a book – a book with an intriguing cover – and I picked it up. As per my usual when browsing shelves upon shelves of novels, I read the brief summary on the back cover and leafed through the first couple of chapters to see if it would be something that interested me. I felt an immediate attraction to the concept of the novel, in that it consisted entirely of interwoven short stories, and decided that I wanted to purchase it. I looked like a complete fool sorting my sack of change into neat stacks of dollars on the check-out counter, but I could have cared less because I had eyes only for the newest addition to my novel collection.

To say that I devoured your book would be an understatement. I tore through the pages, losing myself completely amid the lives and emotions of the characters. I spoke to absolutely no one about this novel in which I was immersed because I felt like if I were to speak of it, I would be removed from the world thriving within its pages. After having locked myself in my room for two days over my Thanksgiving holiday, I emerged having completed each story and marveled at each character.

Specifically, the character of Tillie Henderson spoke to me – not because I, myself, am a prostitute or mother but because her emotions were raw and her mind uncensored. She seemed to capture what many female characters in modern literature lack: reality. One of the reasons that she held such a draw for me was because she was someone with whom I would have never conversed in real life. After reading her story, however, it dawned on me that even those dubbed immoral or profane by society are complex individuals laden with beauty, and I longed to become more intimately acquainted with this intricate character. I would go back

through her chapter and read each page aloud as sort of broken monologue; the words seemed as if they were screaming to be spoken. The motif: “This is the house that Horse built” would choke me up as I spoke it over and over again, and soon my chest was heaving with sobs. All I could think about was how beautiful and powerful this story would be if it were performed as an actual dramatic monologue and not by me in front of my bathroom mirror clutching a copy of the book. However, I could not think of an outlet that would allow me to do this at the current time.

Later though, I discovered a way to make my dream of performing this chapter a reality. I had become involved with the Speech and Debate team at my high school and started participating in the event, Dramatic Interpretation, in which each contestant cuts a ten-minute selection from a published book or play and performs it. At the time, I already had a piece from a play that I was using for my tournaments, but when it came time for me to decide on my piece for the following year (the current 2002-13 school year), I immediately elected to use Tillie’s chapter from *Let the Great World Spin* and began my work on cutting it into a usable, appropriate-length monologue. It was an extremely difficult process to use only ten minutes of the text because there were so many elements of her story that I wanted to cover. I eventually chose to focus on the relationship between Tillie and Jazzlyn, while incorporating some material about Tillie’s past and present situations to develop her background and mindset a bit more.

I then began to work on Tillie’s characterization – how she walked and gestured, what her voice sounded like, her stream of consciousness, the words that were hidden in-between the lines. I have been acting since a young age and still take it very seriously, but this character presented a new challenge for me because it was as if I was becoming an actual human being as opposed to a mere character in a story. She seemed almost too honest, so honest that most people tend to shy away from it because they are ashamed to be confronted with something so uncensored. I wanted to capture this same honesty in my portrayal of Tillie, but I found myself faced with this common fear of “the <expletive>-off truth” as Tillie would call it. I struggled to get into the mind of this mother forced to continue living after her child has died, a parent’s worst

nightmare. Left alone and calloused to all perceptions of love, she has no reason to keep her heart beating, so she doesn't. Personally, one of the most impactful moments in her story is when, in the final scene of the chapter, she takes a gun and kills herself. It isn't an act to get some kind of attention or sympathy like many suicides or portrayals of suicides are; it is her escape. And, I think that it is beautiful in its finality.

Becoming Tillie? It has been an immensely painful process. Arriving in a place where I can comprehend her motivations and emotions? It has broken my heart many times but has ultimately opened my eyes to the truth that beauty isn't always classic or pleasant or socially acceptable; it's also excruciating. Thank you, Mr. McCann, for not being afraid to write beautifully and honestly about a woman who most people would be ashamed to associate with and displaying her as a real human being. It has been an absolute privilege to get to know her.

Sincerely,

Leah Mell